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IS THERE A PLACE FOR WORK IN CHILD DEVELOPMENT?

Implications of child development theory and research for interpretation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, with particular reference to Article 32, on children, work and exploitation.

Martin Woodhead



Save the Children

Radda Barnen (Save the Children Sweden) is a non-governmental organisation that fights for the rights of children, in Sweden and around the world. Activities are designed to improve conditions for children at risk. Radda Barnen acts by itself and in co-operation with others by:

- identifying and analysing problems and potential courses of action;
- sponsoring practical development and support programmes, and sharing the experience gained;
- influencing public opinion.

Radda Barnen Publishing's books are primarily for people who work with children. Our goal is to disseminate knowledge concerning the situation of children and to provide guidance and impetus for new ideas.

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Preface

The vision of Save-the Children Sweden (Radda Barnen) is to make reality of children's rights as they are stated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Most interpretations of the Convention focus on a universal concept of child development. Many textbooks on this issue also seem to assume that there are universal, natural features of child development.

In this paper, however, the case for a sociocultural approach to child development is presented, as a more globally appropriate basis for conceptualising the place of work in children's' lives. This approach puts Western developmental knowledge in perspective, encourages caution in generalising research from one part of the world to another and relativises issues of harm and benefit. In the long term, this way of thinking has the potential to inform the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the author claims.

This paper has been written by Martin Woodhead, the Open University,

United Kingdom. The values and views expressed in it are exclusively those of the author and are not necessarily shared by Save the Children Sweden.

Johan Stanggren

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Summary

This paper is about the role of child-development knowledge and research in international efforts to improve the lives and prospects for millions of working children. Article 32 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is framed in psychological terms. It declares that children must be protected from work that is harmful to their 'physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development'. The Convention presumes a universal concept of 'development' and 'harm' (in terms of what is healthy, natural or adjusted and in terms of adverse effects of work). Most textbooks of child development appear to confirm beliefs about universal, natural features of child development. But our knowledge about the abilities, needs and interests of children during successive stages of their lives is based on highly specific (mainly Euro-American) cultural contexts for childhood and goals for development. There is little space for work within this view of child development. This paper presents the case for a sociocultural approach to child development, as a more globally appropriate basis for evaluating the place of work in children's lives. The concept of 'developmental niche' is offered as a starting-point for understanding the place of work and evaluating its positive and negative effects in specific contexts. Relinquishing universal child-development knowledge sets new challenges for policy and for research. In the long term it has the potential to inform the implementation of UN Convention principles in context-appropriate and child-sensitive ways.

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The issue

One of the most ambitious goals of international social action in recent decades has been to eradicate child labour throughout the world. International action is spearheaded by ILO (1996), UNICEF (1997) and others, on the basis that child labour is in violation of children's fundamental rights by virtue of being exploitative and harmful to their development. The movement to eradicate child labour worldwide is informed by the history of parallel reforms during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century (especially in Europe and North America), which progressively excluded children from the workplace in favour of mass schooling (Cunningham and [Via7r.o](#), 1996). One of the key arguments then; as now, is that time spent in arduous work can both damage health and interfere with the natural developmental processes of play and learning. Making sure that children attend school is seen as one of the main strategies to stamp out child labour. Schools are seen as protecting children's development in an environment dedicated to their welfare and education. As UNICEF dramatically declared:

"Education is one of the keys that will unlock the prison cell of hazardous labour in which so many children are confined. ... Education helps a child develop cognitively, emotionally and socially and it is an area often gravely jeopardized by child labour" (UNICEF, 1997, p 25).

Universal standards and cultural inventions

The insights offered by early developmental psychologists, paediatricians and educationists had a significant role to play in the transformation of nineteenth century European childhoods (Hendrick, 1997). Indeed some have argued that the growth of child development as a scientific discipline owes its existence to the new status accorded childhood, as a period of 'becoming' - playful, immature, innocent etc. (Newson and Newson, 1974). Now, a century later (and with the benefit of hundreds of thousands of research investigations into child development), we might expect a precise specification of the prerequisites for normal, healthy development, which could set an objective standard for intervention in hazardous child labour.

Attempts to eradicate work that is harmful to children's development are linked to a much wider issue about the feasibility of setting boundaries for natural, normal, healthy childhood at different ages and stages of life. Judgements about what is harmful (and about what is healthy) are closely related to knowledge about when children achieve physical maturity, strength and agility, intellectual understanding, levels of personal responsibility, social competence etc. Developmental psychology might be expected to provide an authoritative framework for prescribing age limits - for starting school, the onset of criminal liability, driving a car, going to work, and so on. The concept of 'developmental appropriateness' offers one promising framework for evaluating the quality of children's experiences, the expectations placed upon them, and the treatment they receive. This concept has been powerful in

debates (especially in the USA) about what kinds of early school experience are appropriate - in particular, challenging trends to the early introduction of 'academic' 3Rs teaching (Bredekamp, 1987). The same approach might be taken to children's work, using evidence of normal patterns of healthy child development as a starting-point for deciding what kinds of work activity (if any) are appropriate for each age group.

Prescriptions for children's development at different ages are urgently sought by those responsible for setting regulations for their welfare, intervening in extreme situations, promoting better education etc. At one level, child development knowledge provides a valuable yardstick. Universal agreement can be reached at a general level about milestones of development and about basic prerequisites for physical growth and psychological adjustment. Nevertheless closer enquiry reveals competing theories about children's development that appear to make the goal of precise prescription as elusive as ever (Sigel and Kim, 1996). This conclusion is not as pessimistic as it might at first appear. Increasingly, researchers are taking these competing perspectives as a signal to rethink the status of the knowledge about childhood that they are producing, recognising that it is in an important sense a 'cultural invention' (Kessen, 1979). Leaving behind the positivist ideology of objectivity and ultimate truths that sustained the study of child development for a century, many researchers now favour a more conditional wisdom, founded on a greater sense of the social, historical and cultural location of child development, in terms of children's lived experience, as well as the beliefs and theories of those who care about them and seek to enhance their childhood (Woodhead 1999). In this paper I suggest how this shift in thinking might alter the way children's work is researched, understood and regulated.

Child work and child labour

My starting-point is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989. Article 32 begins:

"States Parties recognise the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development."

The protectionist attitude that proposes to exclude children from certain kinds of work is a notable feature of this Article, by contrast with other Articles of the Convention that emphasise children's rights to self-determination and social participation. In the quest to protect children from the worst experiences of exploitation and labour in hazardous industries, there is a risk that they will also be prevented from working or that their circumstances will be made worse by national and international legal and commercial regulation (White, 1996). Unless we are to follow the principle that all work is detrimental, then a difficult line must be drawn between work that is harmful and work that is benign, or at least harmless. So it is important to emphasise that

the Convention does not challenge work per se - the key words are 'hazardous', 'interfere with', 'harmful' and 'exploitation'. Van Bueren proposes that 'exploitation' is the overriding consideration.

"[There is a] ... fundamental difference between the right to work and being obliged to work. Economic exploitation is labouring at the expense of development. Child labour is exploitative when it threatens the physical, mental, emotional or social development of the child" (van Bueren, 1994, p 264).

Acknowledging that harmful work is part of exploitation leads back to the same basic questions about how harmful effects on development can be identified. What are the criteria for 'harmful work'? ILO tried to resolve the problem by distinguishing 'child work' from 'child labour' on the basis of hazard, yielding the following criteria:

working too young
working too long hours working under strain working
on the streets working for very little pay working with
little stimulation taking too much responsibility being
subjected to intimidation (ILO, 1992)

These criteria may be sufficient in extreme, abusive situations. But ultimately they beg the question of how much is 'too much', what 'too young' means and what 'too much responsibility' means. As White (1996) notes:

" . . . what about the rest, the kinds of work in which probably 95 per cent of the world's working children are involved? ... Although many are rightly tired of the 'child labour/ child work' issue, the failure of agencies (including ILO) to confront it continues to be an obstacle to effective action" (p 12).

The first problem is that parameters of child welfare are relative, not absolute, as Boyden (1990), Ennew (1994) and others have pointed out. A second problem is that no single indicator can be assumed to constitute a hazard. Typically, it is the combination of indicators, their context and the cultural meanings through which they are interpreted that determines the level of hazard. To take one example, high levels of expectation that children care for younger siblings have been considered both normal and functional in many societies, while in others they would be considered negligent and abusive (Weisner and Gallimore, 1977; Nsamenang and Lamb, 1993).

Already, this example draws attention to the shortcomings of much discussion on this topic. Firstly, it is informed by a normative, generally Western image of children's 'development', 'needs' and 'best interests', which are assumed to be the universal benchmarks of healthy development. Secondly, it

is based on a pathological model of harm, a simplistic model of cause and effect within which the effects of work are analogous to the impact of an injury on the body. In cases of physical hazard this may be appropriate. But Article 32 of the UN Convention also speaks of 'mental, spiritual, moral or social development'. For these criteria, the goals of development are cultural and the processes of influence very different from a physical injury. There are different pathways to psychological adjustment, which cannot be defined out of context, any more than the principle of 'best interests' (Alston, 1994). Much that is taken to be about 'natural' or 'healthy' development turns out to be about what is socially and economically adaptive and/or culturally valued. Thirdly, the debate is too often framed in terms of global concepts of 'work' and 'school', 'play' and 'learning', idealisations informed by the cultural experience of the observer, which may have very little to do with the realities of going to work or going to school, playing and learning, as experienced by children themselves. These themes will be elaborated in the pages that follow.

Work in children's development

This is not a systematic review of research into child labour. My purpose is much broader. I take Article 32 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child as a starting-point for asking two kinds of question:

- * How far can knowledge about child development (in its many aspects - physical, social, emotional, spiritual, moral, intellectual etc.) provide criteria for prescribing the appropriateness or otherwise of particular childhood experiences?
- * How far can research tease out the effects of work on children? What factors in work and in the context of work are most detrimental, and what kind of causal model can make sense of their impact?

While these questions originate in current concerns about child labour, they cannot be answered without addressing the current state of knowledge about child development and the place of work within it. The discussion that follows may seem like an unhelpful distraction from the urgent task of combating the most intolerable forms of child exploitation and abuse. The problem is that current social action is based on an unbalanced picture of childhood work. While the priority for research and action is quite properly on children in hazardous situations, much less attention is being given to the place of work in the lives and development of vast numbers of the world's children (Nieuwenhuys, 1994). Child work is neglected in the most affluent as well as the poorest countries. In Britain there has until recently been resistance to carrying out research into an aspect of children's lives that contravenes deeply cherished beliefs about 'normal' childhood (McKechnie et al., 1996). The resulting impression is, firstly, that all children's work is harmful work and, secondly, that most of the world's children do not work. While abusive child work situations receive headline attention, most child work becomes invisible. To balance the picture, we need a better understanding about the nature,

extent and function of work in children's lives, recognising that 'work' takes many forms: paid employment, informal, casual and unpaid work, domestic chores, voluntary work and other contributions to family and community; and acknowledging the extent to which school work and homework are also a form of work. Arguably, a broader appreciation of the place of work (of all kinds) in children's lives from early childhood through to adulthood would be a better starting-

Prescribing for 'child development'

I start with a paradox. The title of this paper is posed as a question, to which there are two competing kinds of answer, revealing a very significant gulf between idealisations and experiences of childhood.

'Is there a place for work in child development?'

Answer one - "Yes!"

If the question is interpreted as being about the place of work in children's lives, the obvious answer is that work has a central role to play. Childhood is a work-full zone. There are at least 190 million working children in the 10-14 age group, according to UNICEF estimates. Three-quarters of these children work six days a week or more (UNICEF, 1997). This does not include the domestic help and casual work carried out by many millions of children throughout the world.

Answer two - "No!"

Interpreting the question as being about the place of work in dominant images of childhood produces a totally contrary reply. Childhood is a workfree zone. Most textbooks about child development have very little (if anything) to say about children's work. Textbook authors typically treat different aspects of child development in turn - physical, social, emotional, cognitive and moral - and concentrate on 'play', 'learning' and social relationships in the contexts of 'family' and 'school'. There is rarely a place for work.

The idealised child in textbook accounts

'The Developing Child' is a highly regarded and much used undergraduate textbook (Bee, 1995). The subject index to the fifth edition includes 5 topics under the theme of 'play' and 7 topics under the theme of 'learning', with several page references under many of these topics. For 'family', 13 topics are listed (and many more for 'fathers', 'mothers' and 'parents'). There are 6 topics listed under 'school', including a 20-page chapter on the impact of 'family and school' (Bee, 1989). No index entries are given for 'work' or workrelated themes. It seems that the author is describing a very particular kind of 'child', living within a very circumscribed definition of childhood. Child development is being constructed as a period of life spent mainly in the contexts of family and school, where the emphasis is on care, play, learning and teaching, at least until adolescence, when self-esteem and social relationships within peer groups assume importance.

This example is not exceptional. Summarising indexes for eight child development textbooks published between 1987 and 1995 revealed 157 entries for 'family', 126 for 'play' and 108 for 'school'. Looking across all eight authoritative accounts of child development, just one entry appeared for 'work'. This was a brief account of the effects of part-time work on adolescents' school performance in the USA (Cole and Cole, 1989). In defence of these textbook

authors' choice of topics, it could be argued that the content reflects North American/European childhoods and is appropriate for a mainly North American/European readership.

"...despite the narrow range of cultural backgrounds represented in this endeavor, students of behavioral development often claim to be describing universal aspects of behavioral development. It has become increasingly clear, however, that much of what has been seen as universal is itself colored by the perspective and orientation of those studying it. This necessarily gives pause to those who would understand human behavioral development in toto, not simply the development of White North Americans living in the late twentieth century" (Lamb and Hwang, 1996, p 2).

Unfortunately, the problem runs even deeper than this. For the topic of children and work, the stance of textbook writers cannot be justified, even within their own cultural settings. While paid work has been marginalised by universal compulsory schooling for nearly a century, child employment remains widespread in the UK (McKechnie et al., 1996) and in the USA (Pollack, Landigran and Mallino, 1990). Family-based domestic work for children is also pervasive (Morrow, 1994), and Becker et al. (forthcoming) have drawn attention to 50,000 children in Britain (some as young as ten) who take substantial responsibility for the daily care of ailing parents or other relatives. The child development reality for these children is not part of the textbook writer's definition of childhood, despite the impact of their work on their skills, identity, self-esteem, social relations and school experience.

Idealised childhoods in global and historical context

Academic myopia about the significance of work in children's development is puzzling even within the context of Europe and North America. Within a global framework it draws attention to the way 'child development' is professionally defined as an idealised construction of Western childhoods, in such a way as to render the vast majority of children's lives throughout the world as deviant, deficient or deprived. Working children are pathologised in the same way as other so-called 'minority' groups (Burman, 1996).

The culturally constructed status of modern childhoods is further highlighted by reference to studies of the recent past. Zelizer (1985) described the shift in thinking about the status of children in North America, from being valued as an economic asset to being valued as an emotional asset. Drawing attention to the growth of ideas about separating childhood off as a protected 'natural' status in Britain, Cunningham notes:

"Until the late eighteenth century it had been axiomatic in all societies that most children should in some way contribute to economic production from an early age. ... Daniel Defoe, in the 1720s commended those textile producing areas of England where 'the very children after 4 or 5 years of age could every one earn their own bread'. John Locke, who ... enjoyed a reputation

for enlightened views towards child rearing and education, thought that children whose parents were unable to support them should be sent to a working school_ at the age of 3, to be inured to habits of hard labor" (Cunningham 1996, pp 31-32).

Recognising that much child development orthodoxy is based on a particular cultural construction of childhood wouldn't matter so much if the subject was contained within Western contexts. Global publishing and communication systems, cross-national research networks and international training exchanges ensure otherwise, as does the professional background of many involved in international child welfare initiatives. The overall flow of ideas, theories and research is one way, from the West to the rest.

As Greenfield and Cocking put it in the preface to their book on minority child development:

"The field of developmental psychology is an ethnocentric one dominated by a Euro-American perspective.... At international conferences, all too often, colonial and other hierarchical power relations are replicated at the intellectual level" (Greenfield and Cocking, 1994, p ix).

Studying child development means studying Western concepts of childhood, using research methods developed in Western research labs. This isn't just a question of imperialist psychologists "thinking locally, acting globally" as Aydan Gulerce put it (Gergen et al., 1996). Scientific psychology has been eagerly seized upon, as a source of 'objective' knowledge. For example, Girishwar Misra observed:

"For a long period, psychology taught in the Indian Universities was pure Western psychology, and attempts were made to safeguard it from the contaminating effect of Indian culture and thought. Its teaching maintained a strong universalistic stance. The research focused mainly on testing the adequacy of Western theories and concepts, wherein participants provided objective behavioural data. In this scheme of scientific activity, culture was an irrelevant and extraneous intrusion" (Gergen et al. 1996, p 497).

Already, these comments draw attention to the dangers of applying idealised, universal models of childhood to the issue of children and work, in ways that fail to take account either of the cultural construction of the model or the cultural context of children's work. Modern 'child development' presents a very particular cultural image of childhood under the guise of a universal model.

The limitations of cross-cultural studies

Just as physical scientists assume that laws governing matter and energy apply equally well in Britain and Bangladesh, so developmental psychologists have generally assumed that they are discovering fundamental laws about

child development. There has always been a small, respectable sub-discipline of cross-cultural psychology. But the main preoccupation of cross-cultural work (at least until recently) has been to test the universality of theories originating in Western research with Western children (Segall et al., 1990). 'Context' and 'culture' have been studied as independent variables that influence universal ways of thinking and behaving. Gustav Jahoda has argued that the 'psychic unity of humankind' is in many ways a laudable premiss for developmental research, which dates back to attempts to counter social evolutionist and racial doctrines in the mid-nineteenth century (Jahoda, 1992). It appears plausible because of the shared context, values and subjectivity of psychologists and their subjects. The pitfall is when conventional developmental milestones become fundamental truths, and when normative social practices become prescriptions for child care and education that condemn other childhoods (see Kessen, 1979).

Two influential examples illustrate the problem. The first concerns measurement of 'social competence'. On the basis of research into the development of behaviours consistent with social adjustment, Susan Harter devised a Social Competence Scale based on items such as the following: "have a lot of friends"; "popular with kids"; "easy to like"; "do things with kids" (cited in Schaffer, 1996). The culture-specificity of these characteristics is fairly obvious. Even within the USA it has been a controversial basis for measuring social competence. A second example is about styles of parenting. Having interviewed American mothers and observed the way they related to their preschool children, Diana Baumrind identified four parental styles: Authoritarian, Permissive, Rejecting and Authoritative. She demonstrated that the Authoritative style (combining warmth with firm control, a respect for children's wishes and verbal, non-punitive punishment) produced the most competent, self-regulating children (cited in Schaffer, 1996). These classic findings have frequently been interpreted as evidence that authoritative parenting styles work best and been generalised beyond the context of US middle-class child-development values and goals.

The search for universal stages of child development

The inappropriateness of a universalistic approach to issues of social competence and parenting style is fairly obvious. Less obvious examples lie in the area of cognitive competence, especially the fundamental principle that development can be described as a sequence of stages. The search for invariant 'stages of human development' has resulted in some of the most powerful and influential theoretical frameworks in developmental psychology. It also provides the major organising principle for contemporary textbooks. The most influential theories would include Kohlberg's stages of moral development, Erikson's stages of adolescent development and Piaget's stages of cognitive development (Durkin, 1995; Schaffer, 1996).

Of these, Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget's theory has been by far the most influential and durable in the face of critical study. This is not the place for a

critique of a complex theory based on extensive research (see, for example, Donaldson, 1978; Wood, 1998). For this discussion, the important point is that Piaget argued that children's development comprised an invariant sequence of broad stages that can be summarised as sensorimotor (birth to approx. 18 months); preoperational (18 months to approx. 7 years); concrete operational (7 years to approx. 11 years); and formal operational thinking (approx. 11 years onward). Other features of Piaget's theory is the emphasis placed on logical, scientific and mathematical thinking and the emphasis on the child learning through his/her own individual activity, interacting with the physical and (to a lesser extent) the social environment.

Generations of researchers have replicated Piaget's experiments. They have used the so-called 'three mountains experiment' to demonstrate young children's failures in perspective taking. They have poured water into different shaped glasses to demonstrate children's inability to understand about the invariance of quantity under transformation, and so on. These and other experiments have been applied in classic cross-cultural comparisons, such as amongst the Wolof of Senegal (Bruner et al., 1966), amongst the Kpelle of Liberia (Cole et al., 1971) and amongst Australian Aboriginal groups (Dasen, 1974). From such studies it became possible for Dasen (1977) to produce a graph comparing 26 communities, in terms of the percentage of subjects in each age group able to show full conservation of liquids (an indicator of attaining concrete-operational thinking). Starting from Piaget's European originated tasks, based on studies with European children, it hardly seems surprising that the evidence favoured European populations as showing higher levels of competence, especially those who had experienced European type schooling.

Piaget's paradigm of universal stages in cognitive development is now subject to extensive revision. The theory originated in a very particular cultural context, not only in terms of the children studied and the tasks set, but in terms of the underlying concept of mature logical reasoning, physical explanation and mathematical understanding. Moreover, Piaget's strongly maturationist view of the natural progress of individual growth through progressive stages can be seen as a reflection of post-Darwinian attempts to reconcile psychological with biological development:

"Perhaps the most fundamental assumption concerning an overall picture of individual development is that of progress. Derived from, or at least legitimated by biological sources, the notion that the individual gets better and better as time passes has been central to most developmental thinking" (Morss 1990, p 173).

When knowledge about child development is condensed into textbooks, or popularised through the media, the essential cultural qualification is rarely supplied. Normative stage theories are too easily converted into prescriptions about children's 'needs' and about the 'developmental appropriateness' of childhood experiences in the family, at school or at work. Evaluations of the

effects of childhood experiences are generalised beyond their context. Culture-specific descriptions are all too easily translated into universal prescriptions, not necessarily by the textbook author, but by those who read, use and apply psychological ideas about children. In the debate about children and work, a de-contextualised concept of child development is implicit in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 32 lists multiple dimensions of development that might be 'harmed' by 'work' - 'physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social'. The concept of development and the goals for development are taken for granted within this individualistic, progressive vision. An increasing number of child-development experts now consider the diffusion of universalistic conceptualisations of child development to be deeply problematic. As Erica Burman put it:

"This naturalization of particular norms and criteria occurs through the treatment of 'expertise' such as is provided by psychology as culturally neutral. However it can be argued that highly cultural, class and gender-specific resources inform international policy and programming for children. Since ... the psychological models are already abstracted from their cultural-historical locations, the move from the naturalization to the globalization of development follows almost imperceptibly. The consequences are that Northern privilege is inscribed in international policies for children, and children and families who fail to conform to those models are either stigmatized or rendered invisible" (Burman, 1996).

Recognising multiple perspectives on child-development goals and processes

Critiques of taken-for-granted psychological concepts have extended to the foundation concept of 'child development' itself, as a particularly powerful overarching way of conceptualising the processes of stability and change, continuities and discontinuities between infancy and adulthood (Bradley, 1989; Burman, 1994; Morss, 1996; Walkerdine, 1993). These writers have been instrumental in challenging beliefs in the scientific objectivity of developmental psychology and in encouraging a more 'reflexive approach'. What this means is that anyone making statements about the 'nature' of child development or about how work 'harms' normal development needs to recognise the way their experience and understanding of children's work, and their location within a particular cultural niche, shape how they think about children's 'nature', 'normality' and 'harm' and modify how they construct it as a 'problem'. Ward (1994) reflects on the mixed feelings generated by descriptions of boys working in an Istanbul workshop:

"We are likely to conclude that our ethical objection to their undertaking, both the kind of work and the hours of labour described, is that those boys had been 'deprived of their childhood'. By this we mean, not only that play as an end in itself is the proper business of children, but that between the ages of 5 and 16 the child should be occupied in institutionalized education between prescribed hours. We feel that these are years properly devoted to exploring

our own potentialities, our relationships with others in the great art of living together, our physical environment and above all, our own enlarging autonomy and independence" (Ward 1994, p 149).

Reflexivity remains an alien principle to most psychologists, who continue to presume they are discovering rather than constructing their subject. But the 'childhood' of which these children are 'deprived' is an idealisation, which has grown out of particular historical and social circumstances. Its applicability in diverse settings has to be demonstrated, not presumed. It may have little to do with how children themselves, or their parents or the communities of which they are apart, understand their young lives. These are questions for study and debate, not for external prescription.

One implication is that the presumed consensus implicit in textbooks of child development needs to be displaced by a more pluralistic concept which acknowledges multiple perspectives on the goals and socialisation experiences that may be appropriate to childhood:

"Multiple perspectives do not signal the end of science.. .. They simply signal the beginning of a new scientific paradigm in which the perspectives of researchers and subjects are specified and studied, not assumed" (Greenfield,

A sociocultural framework for child development

For much of this century the dominant child-development paradigm has sought to discover general laws of child development that can be universally applied. A more relativistic, contextual and cultural approach to child development argues that cultural dimensions cannot be pared away to reveal a universal child-development core. As Richards and Light put it:

"social context is ... intrinsic to the developmental process itself ...[it-is not just] ... the icing on the cake, it is as much part of the structure as the flour or the eggs" (Richards and Light, 1986, p 1).

Sociocultural approaches to child development offer the most promising way of constructing a more inclusive framework for child development. The pioneer of this approach set out the basic principle: •

"The fundamental aspiration of the whole of modern child psychology ... [is] the wish to reveal the eternal child. The task of psychology, however, is not the discovery of the eternal child. The task of psychology is the discovery of the historical child.... The stone that the builders disdained must become the foundation stone" (Vygotsky, cited by Rogoff, 1990, p 110).

On this view, every child is born into a particular social/cultural/historical context. Their development is circumscribed by processes of maturation, but there is no such thing as a 'natural environment' for their development. All

environments are culturally constructed, the product of generations of human activity and creativity. The most significant features of any child's environment are the humans with whom they establish close relationships. These individuals (usually family) are themselves the product of their cultural history and circumstance, which structures their lives and gives meaning and direction to their experiences of their offspring, as they introduce them to cultural practices and symbol systems. The way parents care for their children is shaped in part by their cultural beliefs (or 'ethnotheories') about what is appropriate and desirable, in terms both of the goals of child development and the means to achieve those goals. From this perspective, the Western child-development theories that inform cultural beliefs about stages of development, the place of play, school and work etc. can themselves be viewed as highly sophisticated, research-based ethnotheories.

One of the leading exponents of a sociocultural perspective, Michael Cole, was one of the first to study cross-cultural differences in cognitive development (Cole et al., 1971). He now argues that cross-cultural psychologists were misguided in thinking that where they did find universal developmental processes, these were biological and inevitable. Culture isn't just about cultural differences. It is far more significant than that:

"The emphasis on culture-as-difference overlooks the fact that the capacity to inhabit a *culturally organized environment is the universal, species-specific characteristic of homo sapiens*, of which particular cultures represent special cases. A full understanding of culture in human development requires both a specification of its universal mechanisms and the specific forms that it assumes in particular historical circumstances" (Cole 1992, pp 731-2, my emphasis).

Acceptance of this view - that children's behaviour, thinking, social relationships and adaptation are culturally as much as biologically constituted - has profound implications for prescriptions about the place of work in child development. Children's 'needs', the 'developmental appropriateness' of their experiences, and the 'harmfulness' or 'benefits' of their work cannot be separated from the cultural context in which they are developing, the values and goals that inform their lives and their prior experiences of learning skills and ways of thinking.

It is important to emphasise that this does not entail a retreat into cultural relativism. There is still scope for judgements to be made about the appropriateness of child-development goals and values, although the criteria have shifted. Whereas conventional child-development theories imply that there are universal, natural criteria for judging the quality of childhood, cultural approaches argue that these criteria are constructed and contextual. For millennia, work was viewed as a natural and normal part of childhood throughout the world. During the past one-hundred years, changing socioeconomic circumstances, knowledge and values have altered that view; however, there is still considerable diversity in beliefs and practices (Woodhead et al, 1998).

In due course human societies may come to many more share beliefs about the nature and needs of children. But universality does not make these beliefs, in childcare or their implementation education practices, any less cultural. In short, the benchmarks are no longer intrinsic, fixed and prescribed, but extrinsic, historically-specific and negotiable. (Woodhead, 1997).

In the next section I elaborate on this sociocultural perspective on child development, building on the concept of 'developmental niche' proposed by Super and Harkness (1986). The concept of niche is an illustration of an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Studying children's development within their developmental niche provides the basis for a more context sensitive evaluation of the function of work in their relationships, learning, identity and self-esteem - alongside school, the family and other culturally structured experiences.

The 'developmental niche' for children's work

The concept of 'developmental niche' draws attention to three components of children's environment:

- The physical and social settings they inhabit. This includes who they live with (in terms of family patterns, peer groups etc); the space, organisation and resources in their domestic, play, school and work environments; and the basic schedules of eating, sleeping, studying, working etc.;
- The culturally regulated customs and child-rearing practices. This includes the way parents and others arrange child care and education, the way they relate to the child, instruct them, train them or play with them, their approach to discipline and punishment etc.;
- The beliefs or 'ethnotheories' of parents, or others. This includes goals and priorities for children's development and socialisation, and beliefs about how they can best be achieved, and indeed how far they are able to influence their children's future.

Super and Harkness constructed this framework in order to make sense of cross-cultural comparisons between communities in Kenya and the USA. It has several advantages. First, it draws attention to the interdependency of child-development goals, practices and circumstances. Second, it accommodates a wide range of pathways through childhood. Third, it helps researchers (or anyone trying to define what is quality in child development) to recognise the cultural status of their own beliefs, traditions and values.

Robert LeVine's research on infant care amongst the Gusii of Kenya illustrates these principles very clearly (LeVine et al., 1994). He argues that high birth and mortality rates amongst traditional Gush families placed a premium on early nurturance, with close physical contact, demand feeding and sleeping next to mother. This nurturant style did not incorporate high levels of playful stimulation: mothers remained aloof, with little joint activity or verbal communication. At the same time, managing a large family as well as cultivating the fields put pressure on the mother as caregiver and necessitated a significant contribution from her children. The baby would be entrusted to the care of an older sibling, and by the age of three would already be expected to carry out small domestic chores. Deference to elders and obedience to instructions were emphasised, with praise offered sparingly.

LeVine et al. have compared the Gush infant's experience with the child in Boston, whose survival is virtually assured and whose relationships are marked by reciprocity and mutual responsiveness. In Boston children are provided with plenty of psychological space, they are encouraged to assert

their individuality, and clashes of will are at least expected, if not actively promoted. The power of these very different standards of quality care is conveyed in speculations about how one set of mothers might view the practices of the other. A mother from Boston might view the Gush practice of demand feeding as 'spoiling' the child, the demand for obedience as 'repressive' and the use of young children as caregivers as 'abusive'. A traditional Gusii mother might view the Western practice of leaving infants to cry as 'abusive', tolerating a toddler's challenging behaviour as 'spoiling' and encouraging playful fun as 'over-indulgent'.

The power of beliefs and values

A feature of the developmental niche is the incorporation of belief systems about development (or ethnotheories) as part of the child's environment, and a powerful mediating influence over the process of development. Beliefs about developmental appropriateness are not the exclusive province of professional psychologists. Parents have their own view of developmental milestones, what children should be doing by particular ages, which experiences are beneficial and which are harmful to their growth (Goodnow and Collins, 1990; Harkness and Super, 1996).

From birth, expectations are placed on children about what is appropriate behaviour (Goodnow and Collins, 1990). There is considerable cross-cultural consensus about the significance of major transitions in cognitive and social competence: during the second year of life, again at around 6 or 7 years, and at puberty (Rogoff et al., 1975). Beyond this, the diversity in expectations is striking.

For example, Hess et al. (1980) interviewed mothers of five-year-olds in the USA and Japan about the age at which they expected their children to master specific skills and behaviour. Japanese mothers expected earlier achievement of emotional control, respect for the status and authority of parents and certain areas of personal self-sufficiency. American mothers expected earlier achievement of the social skills of empathy, negotiation, initiative, assertiveness and persuasiveness.

Another study draws attention to the competing perspectives amongst various stakeholders within the developmental niche. Parents and preschool teachers were asked "What are the most important skills for four-year-olds to learn?" In the USA parents and teachers agreed that social and language skills are the highest priority, and gave much less emphasis to pre-academic skills. In a Nigerian sample there was also agreement that language skills are important, although Nigerian parents and teachers identified pre-academic skills as the highest priority. In Hong Kong the study identified yet another pattern, including a discrepancy between teachers and parents. Once again, language skills featured highly, but whereas teachers gave low priority to pre-academic skills compared to self-sufficiency skills, amongst parents pre-academic skills were the highest priority (Olmsted and Lockhart, 1995).

Modern childhoods as a developmental niche

The expectations on childhoods in advanced capitalist economies can be seen as reflecting features of a very particular developmental niche, albeit one that has increasingly been offered as a standard for all. Since the eighteenth century Western childhoods have been progressively constructed as a period of extended economic dependency and protected innocence, a period of rapid learning regulated by natural growth processes and enhanced through universal schooling, which is largely separated off from economic and community life (James and Prout, 1990). It is in this context that child-development theory flourished, culminating in the textbook constructions of child development with which I began. As an antidote to universalistic thinking, it is helpful to draw attention to the respects in which dominant Western expectations of childhood are atypical when looked at from a global perspective. Two examples will suffice.

The first concerns styles of parent-child interaction. Whiting and Edwards (1988) studied mother-child relationships in twelve cultures. The care giving style observed in the USA was ranked highest in the extent of mother's sociability with their children and in the number of playful interactions in which children were treated as equals. This style of interaction has not only become part of Western ethnotheories of development (e.g. as advised by child-care manuals etc.). It has become part of child-development orthodoxy, as a 'natural' way to relate to children. Textbook descriptions of early development generally presume that mother is the principal caregiver. Accounts of mother-infant interaction are primarily based on studies carried out with volunteer (generally middle-class) mothers in laboratory (i.e. public) settings. The emphasis is on the mother's sensitivity to the infant's needs, the reciprocity of their early interactions, the way the mother frames or scaffolds her child's learning etc. From such observations elaborate theories have been constructed about the process of early infant learning.

One particular striking challenge to the insularity of Western developmentalism came from Schieffelin and Ochs (1993). Their interest was in language development. Research with Euro-American families has revealed the subtle parental strategies through which infants are encouraged to become partners in 'proto-conversations'. Their language learning is facilitated by caregivers' adoption of so-called 'motherese', in which intonation is exaggerated, vocabulary and sentence structure simplified, and the child's utterances repeated and expanded (Snow, 1976). When Schieffelin and Ochs carried out research amongst the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, they found few of these features. Caregivers rarely engaged their infants in dyadic communicative exchanges, and when they did they tended to be directive rather than reciprocal. Yet these infants acquired their mother-tongue quite 'normally'. The implication is that our understanding of the prerequisites for 'normal' child development need to be expanded to accommodate a very wide range of styles of mother-infant relationship and patterns of care.

A second example concerns the importance of play. Play is a feature of Western thinking, often set in opposition to work. It is celebrated as fundamental to child development and at the core of child-centred educational philosophy. Playfulness amongst human young is undoubtedly a species feature, and close parallels can be observed with the young of other primate groups (Bruner, 1972). Amongst affluent societies, children's 'need for play' is met in the context of high levels of material resource, not just in terms of the buildings and equipment but especially in terms of play opportunities available to children. Material resources are plentiful and disposable. Children are encouraged to feel confident in using material in a playful way, with limited regard to costs and outcomes. They are presented with choices - there is more than enough to go around - and encouraged to feel powerful as consumers of resources. At another extreme are early childhoods where material resource (especially manufactured equipment) is scarce, for adults as well as for children. Much of children's play is social or based on everyday objects. But children are taught to respect everyday materials as precious and difficult to replace. Children feel privileged to use play equipment - few choices are available. The emphasis is on productivity. These children may play less, but they still play. The difference is that play for them is part and parcel of everyday activity, less separated off and less celebrated as what defines childhood (Woodhead, 1996).

The place of work in the developmental niche

These examples serve to illustrate the plurality of views about children's developmental needs. Turning specifically to the role of children in economic life, Hoffilian et al. (1987) asked parents in eight countries about the value they placed on their children. Only 6% of US parents referred to children's value as contributors to the family income, compared with 75% of Thai parents, 71% of parents in The Philippines and 54% in Turkey. These parents placed much less emphasis on the stimulation and fun of having children, which were major benefits to US parents. In a similar study carried out in Cameroon, parents valued children for the ability to do domestic chores (56%) and run errands (30%) (Nsamenang and Lamb, 1993). In these Majority World economies children are not just playful dependants, they are an essential, trainable, economic resource.

These different views on children's economic utility are borne out by a cross-cultural study in Mexico, The Philippines, Kenya, Japan and the USA (Whiting and Whiting, 1975). Parents were asked about the jobs children should be expected to do and from what age. These parental expectations combined with the researchers' own observations to produce clear contrasts between Western assumptions about childhood and Majority World expectations. In several of these communities it is considered normal, appropriate and desirable for children to contribute to chores from the age of three or four. But this research also cautions against simplistic dichotomies between the conditions of children in so-called modern and so-called traditional societies. Each socioeconomic context is associated with a particular pattern of parental expectations;

and there may be substantial diversity in beliefs within any one context. Nor is it true to say that the most advanced societies place the lowest expectations on children. Amongst hunter-gatherer society studied by Draper (1976), the Kung San children aged 4-9 devoted only 3% of their time to work tasks.

From a Western perspective, the evidence of high expectations for children's work is viewed as a potential threat to children's welfare and development. From his research amongst the Abaluyia of Kenya, Weisner (1989) notes that parents may hold a quite contrary view. Children's work is seen as valuable, not just in preparing them for their adult roles, but in serving an essential function as a form of emotional and social support and work integrates children into a family and community network that places high value on interdependence and interconnectedness. The absence of a productive economic function for young family members in industrialised societies has its own repercussions:

"Western children do not begin to learn the occupational competencies they will need as adults until late adolescence or early adulthood, and often are not prepared for adult responsibilities until about the same time. This continuity may contribute to feelings of alienation and aimlessness experienced by many adolescents and described by many social scientists" (Tietjen 1994, p 406).

There is also good reason to question whether Western early childhoods are quite so 'work-free' as these contrasts would suggest. As noted above, child development rhetoric emphasises the early years as a period of playful innocence. Research that has looked more closely at children's social lives tells a different story. For example, Judy Dunn has drawn attention to very young children's interest and engagement in family activities, events and dramas. Children as young as two years old were observed to show sensitivity to the needs of others, trying to help a sibling or parent in distress (Dunn, 1988). Very young children's enthusiasm to contribute to domestic tasks was confirmed in a study by Harriet Rheingold, in which mothers were observed carrying out domestic chores with their toddlers, e.g. laying a table, sweeping the floor, tidying newspapers:

"All the children, even those as young as 18 months of age, promptly and for the most part without direction participated in some everyday housekeeping tasks performed by adults.... In declaring their intentions to carry out contributing behaviors and in promptly leaving a task on its completion, as well as in verbalizing the accomplishment of the goal - behaviors that increased with age - they showed an awareness of themselves as working jointly with adults to a recognised end" (Rheingold, 1982, p 122-123).

It appears that young children's contributions to adult work may be regulated more by limited opportunities within domestic environments, and the separation of economic activity from domestic life. than any lack of intrinsic

motivation. In any case, as high technology is encouraging more homeworking amongst adults, so children's ability to take an interest in work may increase. Beach (1988) found that as soon as children in a US community were able to talk, they showed abilities to understand the rudiments of their parents' work, describing procedures and naming tools etc. In short, many of children's activities that Western adults have been socialised to call 'play' may from children's point of view be experienced as attempts to contribute, as small examples of 'work'.

Finally, in any discussion of children's work, it is essential to separate out the pressure of parental expectations on children from the focus that these expectations take. Parents in advanced capitalist societies do not place high expectations on children's economic contribution, but they do have high expectations - for children to work hard and achieve high returns in terms of school achievement. Jens Qvortrop has argued that school work is not so separate from economic work as we like to think:

"Exactly as children were useful with their hands in an economic formation in which manual labour dominated, children remain useful with mental activities as the *oikos* changes to one dominated by planning, calculation, desk work and symbols. Historically, children have always been asked to take part in the kinds of activity that are dominant in the respective mode of production. .. Children are active contributors to human capital formation, and it is important to stress that their school work is useful even while it takes place; indeed if children did not do this school work, society would soon cease to function. This, briefly is the way children are economically an integrated part of society" (Qvortrop, 1998; see also Qvortrop, 1995; the term *oikos* refers to 'prevailing, dominant economic organisation').

We may note in passing another curious paradox in thinking about these issues. One highly valued feature of children's school work in Western societies is shared in common with one feature of economic work that is taken by ILO to be 'intolerable'. This feature is that it is compulsory! (See ILO 1998, para 9a.) The stress induced in young US children from high academic expectations at an early age has been seen as a significant contributor to psychological difficulties (Elkind, 1985). Japanese schooling is also frequently cited for the pressures it places on children to achieve (Field, 1995). In short, expectations related to school work have displaced expectations related to economic work in modern views of child development. Neither work nor school are 'natural' routes through childhood. Both are culturally created childhood contexts that are adaptive to particular circumstances and human priorities. Vigilance is required about the expectations placed on children, whether from their employers, their parents or their teachers.

In summary, the concept of developmental niche has the advantage of putting expert (especially Western) developmental knowledge in perspective. It encourages caution in generalising research from one developmental niche to another. It relativises issues of harm and benefit in ways which are more sympathetic to the context and goals for development in a particular socioeconomic and cultural environment. It suggests that the concept of 'developmental appropriateness' of children's work can helpfully be enriched by the principle of 'contextual appropriateness'. In the context of early child development I have argued that local interventions should be governed by both principles, which I call a PACED approach (Practice Appropriate to the Context of Early Development) (Woodhead, 1996).

Applying a sociocultural approach to child-development issues

In this section I apply a sociocultural approach to aspects of development that are in danger of being 'harmed' by work, according to Article 32 of the UN Convention: children's social, physical and mental development, and their education.

Social development

Children's early social and emotional development is marked by some universal features. The emergence of 'specific attachments' are believed to be important for emotional security, as indicated by measures of separation distress that follow a similar developmental course for all societies studied (peaking between 10 and 15 months) (van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg, 1988). After this age, children increasingly tolerate separation, or at least suppress the outward expression of distress, especially as they construct an 'internal working model' or representation of their relationships as continuous, despite separation.

Emotional security: Despite the universality of these general patterns, emotional security is culturally mediated. The numbers and patterns of attachment, the frequency of separations, the way caregivers respond to infant distress, and the way these close relationships are regulated within the family, all vary according to the developmental niche (Super and Harkness, 1982). The universal prescriptions for healthy emotional development that were proposed by Bowlby (1953) in his influential report to the World Health Organization are now recognised as failing to separate out normative patterns of child care from children's psychological needs. His conclusions were informed by a particular child-development niche (post-war UK), in which the focus was on the mother as exclusive attachment figure, whereas children have now been found to thrive in a wide range of care systems, provided consistency is maintained (Tizard, 1991; Lamb et al., 1992). Children forced to separate from attachment figures at an early age in order to work away from home will very likely suffer emotional distress, just as has often been described for the children of affluent Minority World societies who are sent away to boarding school. In such circumstances the extent of trauma will depend not only on individual differences in children's vulnerability, but also crucially on children's prior relationship experiences, combined with the availability of support networks amongst peers and adults (Schaffer, 1996).

Social understanding: Family relationships are the major context for emotional security, and they are also the context for the understanding that children acquire of their social world. From the very beginning, infants are sensitively attuned to the way their caregivers react to people and events, in terms of expressions of love, hate, anger, disgust etc., as well as the words

used to convey, judgements, beliefs and attitudes. While the existence of these processes of 'social referencing' are a universal feature of childhood, the form they take is highly variable. Children are oriented to share the reactions, behaviour patterns and beliefs of their social milieu, including what they see as valuable in themselves and in others and what kinds of behaviour they see as worthwhile pursuing. Learning to complete small tasks and value their achievement is the foundation of children's sense of the importance of play or work or learning. In Majority World settings millions of children are oriented to contributing to the family economy through work, often done alongside domestic chores and school. For many children in Minority World settings, priority is given to extended play and early school learning; domestic chores and economic activity play a less central, but still a significant role. These early experiences coincide with children's construction of a sense of self and personal identity. In contexts where school is the major priority, expectations of achievement become incorporated into the child's feelings of self-respect. The same is true for work. Children assimilate work values into their identity, and judge themselves (in part at least) in these terms.

Peer relationships: During middle childhood and adolescence, a virtually universal pattern is for peer relationships to become more significant in children's lives. Peer relationships become important sources of identity and social support for young people (Tietjen, 1989). In contexts where childhood is dominated by education, the school is a major context for establishing and maintaining these relationships. Much has been written about the importance of school experiences and school achievement in children's personal development, their self-esteem and self-confidence (Durkin, 1995). 'Peer culture' mediates social relationships and shapes appropriate tastes and behaviour (Corsaro, 1997). As for most aspects of child development, textbooks lack any serious treatment of the place of work as a contributor to identity and self-concept. Yet for working children, the peer group at work may be at least as important as a source of security, solidarity and cultural initiation as the peer group at school. For children 'of the streets', the peer group can play a primary role in maintaining psychological health and wellbeing (Ennew, 1995). As peer culture is becoming more globalised under the influence of multinational, adolescent-targeted commerce and media, this will inevitably modify children's interests (White, 1996).

Self and identity: The acquisition of a sense of 'self' has been presumed to be a universal of child development. Western models of child development are premised on an individualistic view of personal development: "The unexamined assumption in social science research is that the individual is a self-contained entity who (a) comprises a unique configuration of internal attributes (e.g. preference, traits, abilities, values, rights etc., and (b) who behaves primarily as a consequence of these internal attributes. The problem is that this model of the self is quite simply not the one that is held by the majority of people in the world" (Kitayama and Markus, 1995, p 366).

Cigdem Kagitcibasi (1990, 1996) argues that modern views of child development are steeped in individualism, with its emphasis on the psychological value of the child to parents, socialisation goals associated with separation and independence, and a style of rearing encouraging autonomy and a strong emphasis on personal, cognitive and social development. This contrasts sharply with the interdependent outlook in traditional agrarian societies where obedience training is emphasised and there is little place for encouraging play for choice or for the exploration of ideas and beliefs. In the face of social change it could be argued that the sooner the Western model of child development is adopted the better. Kagitcibasi proposes that this may not be the inevitable nor necessarily the most appropriate model to follow. She offers a third view, better characterising the experience of many developing societies, in which the child's development has acquired psychological value, but in the context of family patterns still emphasising interdependence and respect for parental authority:

"Western psychology affirms one type of self - the separated self - as the healthy prototype. It is the prescriptive nature of psychology that empowers it. It can be used to contribute to human well-being; but if misguided it can do more harm than good. This is what the critics of American psychology are complaining about: Psychology is a part of the problem, rather than the solution, of selfishness and lack of social commitment" (Kagitcibasi, 1996, p 66).

Research is beginning to demonstrate the way orientations to 'independence' versus 'interdependence' impact on children's development, from the very earliest months of life. For example, Bomstein et al. (1990) observed the relationship of mothers with their five-month-olds in Tokyo and New York. The behaviour of the infants shared much in common, but the mothers showed contrasting orientation to their infants' behaviour. Michael Cole summarises these differences:

"American mothers were more responsive when their infants oriented to physical objects in their environment; Japanese mothers were more responsive when their children oriented to them. Moreover the mothers made overt attempts to change the locus of their infants' orientation where it did not fit their preference ... we see a pervasive feature of cultural influences on development. Japanese maternal behaviour is part of a system that highly values a strong dependence of the child on the mother while American maternal behavior is part of a system that values independence" (Cole, 1992, p 752-3).

The contextual specificity of self-other relationships is also revealed by comparing two studies of early socialisation within the family. In Britain Judy Dunn (1988) has drawn attention to the developmental significance of the confrontations between toddlers and their caregivers, the teasing and fighting that goes on amongst siblings, as well as the evidence of capacities for empathy

and cooperation. Her account of the way children acquire a sense of self and other and learn social rules and social understanding is already part of textbook psychology. Yet there is a worry about whether developmental processes interpreted from studies in the UK and the USA can be generalised more widely. Edwards (1995) urges caution:

"...the classic account of the toddler's drive for autonomy and separateness ...appears incorrect as a thematic description of toddler development in many non-Western cultural communities. ...For example, in Zinacantan, Mexico, ...the transition from infancy to early childhood is not typified by resistant toddlers demanding and asserting control over toileting and other self-help skills (the familiar 'no, I can do it') but instead by watchful, imitative children who acquire toilet training and other elements of self-care with a minimum of fuss" (Edwards, 1995, p 47).

If we start from the assumption that child development is a universal and natural process that can be described and prescribed, then these cultural issues come as something of a revelation. They suggest the need for context specific accounts of social development. Judy Dunn has herself drawn attention to the subtle differences even between communities that share a great deal in common, in Cambridge in the UK and Pennsylvania in the USA:

"Children are cultural creatures by the time they are 3; their fantasies and the rules that shape their lives and style are not just those of the family but those of the wider culture beyond the family" (Dunn and Brown, 1991, p 170).

Physical development

Physical growth and strength: The clearest evidence for biologically based universality is to be found in physical development. Regularities in children's growth have been well charted and set obvious limitations on their capacities for physical labour. Growth processes can be retarded by nutritional deficiencies, and by the stress of unnatural or repetitive activity. The existence of sensitive periods in children's growth are now well documented. For example, malnutrition affects neurological maturation during the first two years (Pollitt, 1994). Puberty is another period of rapid growth, although the impact of environmental hazards are less well understood (Alsaker, 1996). Despite their universality, these processes of growth and change are as much culturally mediated as every other aspect of development. Growth patterns carry quite different significance according to children's developmental niche. The increased physical capacities associated with adolescence have a profound significance in contexts where young people's strength, agility and stamina enhance their potential to contribute. These attributes are of much less consequence in Western societies (except for sporting achievements). Instead psychological and social implications of this life phase are emphasised.

Cultural priorities for tool **use**: the same picture emerges in respect of more specific aspects of motor development. There are universal patterns, with increased skill in eye-hand coordination, and increased physical competence and mobility, irrespective of context. But the uses to which these emergent skills are put is patterned by the developmental niche from the very earliest months. In Western contexts motor coordination is practised through grasping rattles, playing with 'activity centres', assembling lego blocks, laying out Brio trains or dressing Barbie dolls. Mobility is marked by learning to sit on trikes and push trucks. Although free exploration is constrained by the dangers of the street and traffic, and increasingly institutionalised within a specialised nursery or kindergarten environment (Singer, 1992). In nonindustrial niches these skills are practised through play with natural objects, everyday household items or tools. A brickchipper's child may be starting to practice hitting bricks with a small hammer, at an age when other children are hitting wooden or plastic pegs into a block of holes, with equal enthusiasm. Mobility makes possible first experiences of running errands, carrying water, weeding crops, at first in play, but with steadily increasing responsibility. Acts of giving and receiving can be observed in very young infants:

"No parent and no observer can fail to be aware of how often very young children show, offer, and give objects to others. Often such gestures appear to be social overtures. ... As soon as children can walk they will stagger over to someone, especially if that person is unfamiliar, and offer an object" (Dunn, 1998, p 99).

The way these prototypic skills become integrated in children's development depends on the way the young child's initiative is followed up and given content, meaning and purpose.

Participation in culturally valued activities: Barbara Rogoff has made a close study of the way children's growing competencies are incorporated into the cultural life of a child's environment through a process of 'guided participation' (Rogoff, 1990). She argues that parents and other caregivers are active in structuring children's environment according to their perceived goals for development. There are several levels of structure. At a macro-level is the overall timetable of the child's day (the balance of time for play, tasks, feeding, washing, resting etc.), the opportunities for participation in specific cultural activities and the extent to which these activities are separated/ integrated. At a micro-level is the way specific tasks and activities are adapted to the perceived capacities of the child, broken down into manageable elements and scaffolded through interactions that enable the child to achieve a goal or complete a task. Comparing early childhoods in Guatemala, India, Turkey and the USA, she argues that the process of guided participation is universal, but that important cultural variations are related to the goals of development and the relationship between children and adults. She highlights the contrasting experiences of developing skills and competencies

in these developmental niches, drawing particular attention to the extent to which children observe and participate in ongoing adult activities, including work:

"In communities where they are segregated from adult activities, children's learning may be organized by adults' teaching of lessons and provision of motivational management out of the context of adult practice; in communities in which children are integrated in adult settings, learning can occur through active observation and participation by the children with responsive assistance from caregivers" (Rogoff et al., 1993).

In contexts where children participate in adult social and work activities, children showed intrinsic motivation to identify with adult activity, and they learned mainly through observation and modelling of skill, with the caregivers' role to support their activity. By contrast, in communities in which children are generally segregated from work activities, caregivers took more responsibility for managing their activity and their motivation, with more explicit instruction, and more playful activity (Rogoff et al., 1993).

Mental development

As discussed above, the single most influential expression of a universal theory of child development can be found in the work of Jean Piaget. The division of development into discrete stages (sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational and formal operational) is the best known expression of his monolithic account, with its emphasis on the individual child progressively constructing an internal representation of the properties of his/her environment.

Understanding in context: The experimental procedures on which Piaget built his theory have been shown both to underestimate children's abilities and to neglect the significance of the contexts through which their abilities are revealed (Donaldson, 1979; Light and Perret-Clermont, 1989). The stages of cognitive development that Piaget assumed to be universal expressions of human maturation turn out to be embedded in the context of cultural experience, social relationships and knowledge systems. This is especially true of the final stage of formal-operational thinking. Mature individual capacities for logical, abstract thought are not simply the culmination of a developmental process; they are the product of a particular form of cognitive socialisation, which is strongly linked to school learning and instruction (Mercer, 1995; Faulkner et al., 1998).

Goals for cognitive development: Mental development cannot be defined in absolute terms. It is culturally defined. As Rogoff argues:

"The developmental endpoint that has traditionally anchored cognitive developmental theories - skill

reasoning and scientific, mathematical, and literate practices - is one valuable goal of development, but one that is tied to its contexts and culture, as is any other goal or endpoint of development valued by a community... Each community's valued skills constitute the local goals of development ... In the final analysis, it is not possible to determine whether the practices of one society are more adaptive than those of another, as judgements of adaptation cannot be separated from values" (Rogoff, 1990, p 12).

This point is vividly illustrated by Terezinha Nunes' study of Brazilian street children's competence in mathematics. She gives the example of a 12-year-old street vendor who had only attended school to grade 3. He was offering coconuts at 35 cruzeiros. When asked "How much will ten cost?" he replied:

"Three will be 105; with three more that will be 210 ... I-need four more. That is... 315 ... I think it is 350" (Nunes et al., 1993, p 19).

His reply demonstrates his mathematical competence within the context of the market place, which Nunes found did not generalise into the school. Conventions of school calculation are quite different, which led some children to comment that "Street mathematics was not 'the right way of doing sums'" (cited in Nunes, 1996).

The first implication is that children may be more capable than developmental psychology gives credit for; although whether they are capable and how they are capable depend very much on the context and quality of their learning experiences. The second implication is that questions about whether work is detrimental to mental development need to be contextualised in terms of prior questions about the cultural value placed on particular forms of competence, about the adaptiveness of learning experiences provided by work, and, about the capacity of school systems to support the learning process. Culturally situated studies of children's learning through specific cultural practices, in the family, work, school and community, are now offering an alternative to universal stages of cognitive development (Rogoff and Chavajay, 1995).

Education

In much of the debate about detrimental effects of work, a comparison is made with presumed benefits of schooling. Whereas Article 32 of the UN Convention requires that children be prevented from engaging in hazardous work, Article 28 requires that all children should attend primary education. The drive to achieve universal basic education, signalled by the 1990 Jomtien conference in Thailand, is motivated by powerful arguments that this is the single most effective way to protect children from exploitative child labour, to teach essential skills for the modern world (i.e. literacy and numeracy), and to fuel economic growth in developing societies. Yet the obstacles to implementing universal, relevant, consistent quality schooling are immense, and the impact on the lives of working children far from straightforward (Sernell 1995; Boyden 1994; Boyden et al 1998 Chapter 7)

Initiation into schooled cognition: In this paper I briefly address just one aspect of this complex issue: the claim that schooling enhances children's general cognitive abilities; and conversely that being deprived of effective schooling (as so many working children are) risks retarding children's intellectual abilities. Early cross-cultural studies of children's cognitive development appeared to endorse this view, arguing that the impact of school in a culture was to "push cognitive development faster and further" than in cultures without schooling (Greenfield and Bruner, 1966, cited by Cole, 1990). But more recent work has questioned this conclusion, or at least set it in a broader cultural and historical context.

One of the problems is that while the term 'cognitive development' implies a very broad and general set of competencies, the measures used to assess cognitive development are, in fact, quite narrow and distinctive in their reliance on particular logical principles, articulated through verbal and graphical media. As Cole notes, the measures taken to represent cognitive advancement are isomorphic with modes of communication and thinking taught through school:

"verbal logical problems map neatly onto the discourse of school with its motivated exclusion of everyday experience and its formal mode" (Cole, 1990, p 105).

In this way, indicators of cognitive development that originate from research in a society dominated by schooling reveal other societies without schooling to be 'deficient'.

From one point of view, what children learn at school liberates their minds for universally valid modes of advanced abstract thinking. But from another point of view, the curriculum and pedagogic practices so distinctive of modern schooling are designed to initiate young minds into very particular culturally valued forms of schooled cognition (e.g. Butterworth and Light, 1992; Rogoff and Chavajay, 1995). The emphasis of school learning, on language as a medium of instruction, de-contextualised learning, literacy and symbolic numeracy need to be understood as a modern adaptation to a particular set of socio-economic and cultural priorities in high technology, information-based economies.

Learning cultural tools: School-based communicative and cognitive skills are so firmly established in the very recent history of human societies that we take them for granted as a normal and necessary feature of child development, as skills to be mastered by all. A longer term historical perspective draws attention to the invention and spread of cultural tools of literacy and numeracy, and their impact on thought, memory, and social relationships. VJestem-style schooling was first established around 6,000 BC, largely to promote the new-found potential in written communication and in

symbolic systems of numeracy (Goody, 1977). As these 'new' cultural tools have gained social and economic significance, so older valued skills have diminished. In the West many traditional domestic and agricultural skills, navigation skills, weaving, carpentry, metalwork, needlework, craft and other skills that were once essential for survival come into that category. They have been displaced by increasingly technology-dependent skills, and the requirement of mastery of ever more sophisticated symbolic communications systems that regulate international trade, manufacturing processes, everyday financial transactions and domestic appliances.

Acknowledging the way features of schooled cognition link to expectations of 'modern' economic, political and social systems provides a more adequate framework for engaging with concerns about the detrimental effects of work, as well as claims for the benefits of school. Michael Cole concludes that apparently general effects of schooling on cognition result from the transfer of specific skills in socially adaptive ways:

"If my view ... is approximately correct, it cautions against the position, still easy to encounter in international development circles, that education will develop the minds of the world's non-literate populations, thereby serving as the engine of economic and political development. Education provides 'new tools of the intellect' to be sure but without contexts of use, these tools appear to rust and fall into disuse" (Cole, 1990, p 107).

In summary, the debate about children's work and education is dogged by idealisations about schooling as an unproblematic solution to human development issues. In many contexts, modern schooling is a positive experience that enhances employment possibilities and quality of life. But in other contexts, poorly managed, inadequately resourced school environments into which children are compulsorily committed may be as prejudicial to their 'development' as are many work environments. School environments, like the environments in which children work, are human creations that both promote and constrain possibilities for development of human potential (Le Vine and White, 1986). They are also not fixed. While some countries struggle to resource basic school provision, schools in other countries are being transformed by information technology, in terms of the curriculum taught, methods of teaching, and expectations of pupil competence (Gill 1996). Variable and shifting definitions of quality education are the starting point for asking questions about the place of school and/or work in children's lives.

Extending the concept of developmental niche

The concept of 'developmental niche' has many advantages over universal models of child development, as a framework for examining the functions and appropriateness of children's work. It acknowledges the sociocultural structuring of child development, the mediating power of beliefs and values as well as the plurality of functional child-development pathways. But it can be challenged on a number of counts:

Do sociocultural approaches invite relativism about children's welfare? It can be argued that this paper opens the door to a relativistic view of child development, in which harmful work experiences are justified in terms of cultural traditions and parental values. This criticism can be answered at two levels.

First, expectations of childhood can be evaluated in terms of how far they are functional within the context of the niche, how far they are adaptive in terms of children's circumstances, prospects etc.

Second, this framework does not preclude applying external criteria to define the boundaries of adequacy beyond which children's work is likely to have to have pathological consequences, in terms of stunted growth, emotional disturbance, social isolation, learning disability etc. It is essential to evaluate whether childhood experiences are 'developmentally appropriate', but such questions cannot be answered at a universal level, except in very general terms.

Additional concepts are needed if we are to bridge the gulf between general developmental principles and diverse childhood realities; concepts like 'developmental adaptiveness', 'social adjustment' and 'contextual appropriateness'. These concepts insert a relativistic dimension to the debate, but they are not a capitulation to extreme and self-defeating relativism. The point is that these issues need to be addressed, not taken for granted. A sociocultural framework rejects the idea of prescribing for child-development environments in a once-and-for-all way. Child development needs to be negotiated, not prescribed. Within boundaries of adequacy, innumerable sustainable niches for child development place differential emphasis on human potential for social integration, autonomy, loyalty, obedience, playfulness, assertiveness, task orientation, physical strength, craft skill, artistic representation, literacy, numeracy, intellectual abstraction, spirituality, and so on.

Does the developmental niche assume homogeneity? The developmental niche can appear a somewhat static view of the context of children's development, presumed to be relatively coherent in terms of economy, social organisation, values and aspirations; as well as in terms of the emphasis of parents' child-rearing values. The concept of niche can appear to diminish the significance of generational differences, parent-teacher differences and parent-child

differences. In the course of a day, children may be required to negotiate several different contexts, which may entail conflicting sets of values and expectations. They face competing pressures of family, school and work, and often incompatible expectations of parents, employers and teachers, not forgetting their peer group with whom they may identify for their own personal values. To be useful, the concept of niche must be inclusive of multiple stakeholders in children's development.

A related criticism is about the possibility of accommodating heterogeneity and social change. Research accounts mainly polarise traditional agrarian contexts against modern Western urban contexts as if these were homogeneous and comprehensive of contemporary childhoods. Yet the majority of the world's children do not live in one or other of these developmental niches, with a coherent cultural code of values and expectations for their development. These complexities to any attempts at consensus over 'child development' are compounded by the evidence of social changes that are transforming working children's lives. Most children growing-up in the Majority World are neither wholly in school nor wholly in work. They may be working 'on the streets', but they are not children 'of the streets'. They have families and communities to whom they return at night, or at least from time to time. Their work may be hazardous, but they are not in one of the more 'visible' hazardous industries. Their lives are shaped both by traditional values that demand an economic contribution and by modern values that impose an educational expectation. Their lives are governed by competing pressures, including increasingly globalised consumer values, against a backdrop of poverty (Boyden, 1990; White, 1996). A complete account of the harmful effects of work must acknowledge these complexities, recognising that what may be normal and natural for one generation may be perceived as harmful by the next.

Do working children have a role in shaping their own developmental niche? Children are not passive in the process. They are active contributors to their developmental niche, attempting to make sense of their social world, sharing the cultural meanings offered by their parents peers and others, and gradually coming to an understanding and evaluation of their own experiences of child development. Recognising that children are not just 'objects of concern', but 'subjects with concerns' requires reviewing their status as competent to contribute to determining what is in their best interests (Prout, 1998). The importance of listening to children as the primary stakeholders in the issue of work and development was the starting-point for a parallel study of children's perspectives on their working lives (Woodhead, 1998). This theme will be elaborated in the next section.

How does work affect children's development?

So far in this paper I have concentrated mainly on the first issue raised in the introduction, about the concept of developmental appropriateness of childhood work experiences. I want now to turn to the second issue, of how work might be said to 'harm' development. Article 32 of the UN Convention presents harm as unproblematic, implying a pathological model of influence, as if the effects of work were all as visible as being poisoned by a hazardous chemical or injured by unsafe machinery. While the health hazards associated with children's work are a key target for research and intervention, many of the important effects of work are far less tangible or direct. Defining satisfactory indicators for psychological attributes - the social, mental, moral or spiritual development referred to in Article 32 - is much more tricky, and is much more open to local, context-specific interpretation.

The concept of 'work' also needs unpacking. Studies of load carrying, chemical handling etc. can measure some of the direct effects of work, in terms of physical injury or damage to health. But many effects of work in children's lives may not be about the work itself at all, or only marginally so. The hazard or benefit in work may be in the context of work, the hours worked, the contract with employers, the way children are treated, the presence or absence of support networks, the availability of positive or negative role models etc. Some so-called 'effects' of work are in fact very indirect indeed, as in the effects on educational achievement.

The task of identifying 'detrimental effects on development' must also acknowledge that the process of psychological causality is not nearly so straightforward as suggested by the mechanistic models of everyday (and much scientific) discourse. Conceptualising causality in child development has been a major issue for developmental psychology, because the topic bridges the biological and social sciences (Butterworth and Bryant, 1990). At one extreme are explanations that see behaviour as shaped by the contingencies of the environment, while at the other extreme are explanations in terms of maturational processes within the child. An alternative transactional model recognises the partial truth in both of these perspectives and seeks to combine them in a more dynamic, interactive model of the child's relationship to his/her environment (Sameroff, 1987). A transactional approach has several features that can shed light on the issue of how children might be affected by their work.

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Children are active. Children are not passively 'affected' by the experience of work. As thinking, feeling, active beings, children are active participants in their development, and (at least in part) they shape the impact of their environment. The way an outsider perceives positive or harmful influences on a child may not coincide at all with the way a child receives those influences. The child defines the effective environment for development, according to what kinds of activity they seek out, what kinds of stimulation they attend to, and what selective interpretation they place on what they see, hear and feel. In this way, children are producers of their own development (Lerner and Busch-Rossnagel, 1981). At different stages of development certain features of the environment may be more salient to children than others. The category 'child' is not homogeneous. Work experiences are quite different according to children's social class, gender or ethnic status, and the impact of work may be quite different. Of course, there are also profound individual differences. For example, temperament modifies children's vulnerability and resilience to the impact of life experiences, including the experience of work. The first lesson is that a child-centred approach is necessary to achieve an understanding of 'harm' and 'benefit'.

Effects are dynamic. As discussed earlier, the most important ingredients in any child's developmental niche are the other people (children and adults) that inhabit it. Work, like school and family is a social context where relationships with others (employers, customers, peers) are an important part of the effects of work. When children are young, their initiatives are (typically) regulated by a small number of caregivers who make their demands on the child according to a powerful cultural code of expectations of appropriate behaviour. These expectations are differentiated according to the age, gender, and individuality of the child and modified according to context and ecological pressures. As they get older, so their behaviour is coordinated within an increasing number of social contexts and relationships. These experiences affect children, but children in turn affect their physical and social environment. Stated formally, a transactional model describes how an event at Time 1 will affect the child and modify their behaviour at Time 2. But it isn't just the child who is different at Time 2. The environment will have changed too, and not just because of the passage of time. Parents or employers, siblings or peers will modify their treatment of the child at Time 2, according to the way the event (or the child's reaction to the event) affected them at Time 1. A transactional model would predict that work affects children through a progressive sequence of actions and reactions. For example, if a young child is instructed by a parent to go and collect firewood, their compliance modifies their experience, their physical activity, the possibilities for play and learning, the scope for relating to siblings and peers. Their parent will react differently according to how well they believe the task has been accomplished. This small episode affects the child, but crucially it also affects their parent (and hence the child's environment). On the next occasion the child approaches their task with different skills and attitude, but the parent also approaches the task in a different way; they may

make a different demand, or be more threatening or encouraging. Substituting 'employer' for 'parent', the framework can inform the progressive, dynamic effects of work in any number of contexts. In short, work does not affect children in a once-and-for-all way. To understand the impact of work requires tracing the transactional relationships that shape children's involvement in work, their experience of it, the impact it has on them, and the way each of these is mediated by the expectations that are placed upon them and that they increasingly place upon themselves.

Effects are mediated by a cultural code. One of the features of the developmental niche is the cultural code of beliefs about child development. These inform the 'expectations' placed on children, and the way they eventually come to evaluate themselves. Children are not just being affected by work at a behavioural level. They are trying to make sense of their work. They have beliefs and feelings about what they do: the value of work to their families and to themselves, the risks they run, the hazards to their health, the opportunities taken and missed, in terms of school attendance, future work, social relationships etc. They may form these impressions for themselves, but much of the content of these feelings and ideas will be mediated by others, part of the cultural code of often competing social understandings shared amongst peers, parents, employers and communities. This process begins in infancy when the child is closely attuned to the way their-caregiver(s) react to people and events. As they grow older, children internalise (and to some degree also negotiate) these cultural codes of behaviour, meaning and expectations of what is normal and proper, threatening or enjoyable, worthwhile or pointless, necessary or dispensable. These beliefs and values moderate the impact of work, the functions it serve in children's lives, and the degree to which it is in fact 'detrimental' or 'beneficial' to their welfare. In short, even where on health grounds work might be said to harm development, children may be strongly attached to it. They may recognise the costs, but also value the benefits, in terms of identity and self-esteem.

Work does not affect the child in isolation. Conventional child development is inherently individualistic. But children themselves are inherently social. Any effects of work do not operate on the child alone, but on the child as part of a work group, a family group, a student group, and so on. Work is one of a constellation of variables that affect the child. Complex synergistic relationships exist between poverty, parental behaviour, undernutrition, work, schooling, support networks and any number of other significant variables. For example; in a study of growth patterns comparing non-working students with child labourers, Satyanarayana et al. (1987) found that the lower adolescent growth rates were part of a pattern including inadequate nutrition, excessive energy expenditure, frequent illnesses, inadequate primary health care and a less favourable psycho-social atmosphere.

my argument can be turned on its head. The contextual theme of this paper may apply to models of causality too. After all, transactional theory originates in North America, and may in part reflect socialisation patterns in that developmental niche, in which infants are recognised from the outset as separated, socially competent identities, and in which assertive, playful, reciprocal social interactions are encouraged, based on relatively egalitarian relationships, with the goal of encouraging autonomy and self-determination. Descriptions of transactionalism may be a recent version of 'textbook child development', part of the construction of child development that mediates expert understandings and interventions in Western liberal democracies. Children in more hierarchical, collectivist societies may be much more passive (at least overtly) in contexts where roles are ascribed, expectations are more fixed and obedience is a virtue. Contextually based research is required to tease out what may turn out to be very different processes of effect in each setting. The appropriateness of generalising 'detrimental effects' from one context to another is something that needs to be demonstrated, not presumed.

Three examples of context-specific research

In this final section I want illustrate some of the lessons of this analysis by reference to three contrasting examples of research carried out in very different contexts, with diverse groups of working children.

Working lives on the street

The crucial distinction between children 'on the street' and children 'of the street' is now widely recognised, although in some ways the more important distinction may be between home- or family-based children and homeless or street-based children, acknowledging that many children of the street can nonetheless be family-based, notably the pavement families in urban India. Both groups are working children, but their circumstances are completely different. The first (and more numerous) group are family- or home-based; their work is often closely tied to the family economy. The second group are homeless and street-based. Their childhood experiences have often been marked by some combination of emotional insecurity, neglect or maltreatment. Living on the streets, they are more vulnerable to harassment and abuse, and they are more dependent on peers or welfare agencies for support (Ennew, 1995).

These two groups of children may do the same kind of work but their work may play quite a different role in their lives and their development, as a study by Campos et al. (1994) illustrates. Focus-group discussions and open-ended interviews with 150 'home-based' and 150 'street-based' children revealed the divergence of their lifestyles.

Both groups engaged in similar kinds of work activity. But many more of the home-based children reported street vending which requires some capital (37% compared with 10%), while more of the street-based children engaged in non-capital-based street work such as washing cars, collecting paper (65% compared with 38%). For the street-based children, these work activities were much more likely to be part of a lifestyle that also included stealing, prostitution, the use of alcohol and drugs, and frequent contact with the police (including arrest and imprisonment). Peer relationships held a special significance for these children. In the absence of family support and regulation, a sense of security and social support were fulfilled by the turma (or gang). But the turma also served other functions:

By contrast, for home-based children, peer group influences were balanced by the continuing influence of parents and wider family networks. Home-based children were much less likely to engage in illegal economic activities, drug abuse etc., and they were much more likely to combine street work with school attendance.

Despite their close proximity on the streets, and indistinguishability to the outside observer, the issues surrounding the impact of work may be different for the two groups. For home-based children, work may be economically essential, and it may serve some significant socialising functions, including developing a sense of responsibility and efficacy as contributors to family income. At the same time, the necessity of work may restrict their participation in school. These children are at risk working on the streets, but arguably their family base renders them less vulnerable than street-based children, for whom the absence or breakdown of these family ties is the major factor shaping the course of their development. For street-based children, it is unlikely⁵ that working as vendors or car washers is in itself a risk factor. Indeed it is more likely that maintaining a stake in socially-condoned economic activity can contribute to protection from the risks from alcohol and drug abuse, prostitution, thieving and other antisocial or auto-destructive activities associated with their lifestyle.

Effects of part-time work on educational and social development

The second example summarises evaluation studies in Europe and North America. These have mainly concentrated on the impact of part-time work on children's school achievement and social relationships within and outside the family. They are included here because they illustrate both the contextual specificity of effects and the value of adopting a transactional model of causeeffect relationships. Early studies carried out in Britain and the USA concluded that work impaired children's school achievement and attitudes. Unfortunately, while the evidence of an association between work and achievement was clear cut, the direction of their causal inference was not. As McKechnie put it:

"A child who is less successful at school may be more likely to seek satisfaction in work. The more satisfaction a child obtains at work, the less attachment he or she may have to schooling" (McKechnie et al., 1996, p 221).

More recent research has concentrated on two major issues: how far are any effects of work related to the number of hours worked; and how far is work a cause and how far is it a consequence of lower school achievement?

On the first question, most Euro-American research suggests that the longer hours students work in a week, the lower their educational achievement (Steinberg et al., 1982; Mortimer and Finch, 1996). Fifteen to twenty hours per week or more is generally considered to be a threshold for these

associations. At the other end of the scale, recent UK research suggests that modest levels of part-time work may be associated with higher levels of achievement! Surveying 400 adolescents in Scotland, McKechnie et al. (1995) found that young people working five hours per week or less had better records of school attendance and higher levels of school achievement than those who did not work at all. Amongst young people working more than five hours per week, attendance and achievement were worse than either of these groups. In other words, while moderate levels of part-time work has positive associations, there is an educationally vulnerable group that takes on more demanding work commitments. However, to turn to the second question, these studies have successfully demonstrated a correlation between employment and school achievement - they have not demonstrated the direction of causal effects. Disengagement from school work is just as likely to be the cause as the consequence of increased involvement in out-of-school work.

A longitudinal study by Steinberg et al. (1993) is a step in the direction of resolving this issue, at least within the US context. Steinberg et al. questioned 1800 high school students over a two-year period during which many students began to take on part-time work or increased their hours of work. Their first finding supports the idea that it is disaffection from school that leads students to take on work, not vice versa. Those students who later took jobs reported poorer initial educational performance than those who stayed out of the employment market. They reported less interest in school, lower grades and lower educational expectations, as well as less time on homework. But this is not the end of the story. A second finding suggests that the experience of employment served to amplify these students' disaffection from school. When the students were reassessed, those who had taken on substantial part-time work were spending even less time on homework, were missing classes more often, and had even lower educational expectations (calculated by controlling for initial differences between workers and non-workers). We may speculate (adopting a transactional framework) that these youngsters' disaffection with school not only motivated their decision to work, it affected their relationship to their teachers, and in turn the teachers' expectations of them and predictions for their future. While taking a job may have further alienated them from school life, their experience of school life may also have changed.

Similar conclusions are reached by Bachman and Schulenberg (1993) from their extensive study of associations between intensity of part-time work and psycho-social indicators, including drug use and problem behaviours. They speak of a syndrome of mutually reinforcing behaviours:

These studies illustrate the way the impact of work is embedded in a host of long-term patterns, many specific to the US context. Patterns of child development effects cannot be assumed to generalise to other contexts (Woodhead 1988).

Evaluating work in the context of social change

Accommodating the complexities of social change is a crucial challenge in a sociocultural approach. Oloko's study of the effects of social change on child street-traders in Nigeria well illustrates the complex relationships between changing economic/ecological/social structures including schooling on the one hand, and emergent child-development values and patterns of socialisation on the other. She writes of a 'crisis of moral values' as specialised features of schooling combine with urbanisation and technological values to partially displace kin structures, and in so doing redefine child development (Oloko, 1993). Her conclusions are based on extensive interview research with children from poor communities involved in street occupations in the major Nigerian cities of Lagos, Calabar and Kaduna.

Street trading has been a feature of Nigerian childhoods, with young children working alone or apprenticed to older siblings or parents, pursuing gender linked occupations. According to Oloko, children's development benefited in terms of specific skills associated with trading (e.g. calculating quantities, costs and profits). They also acquired interpersonal skills necessary to attract customers and maintain their loyalty while minimising conflict with the young competitors on whom they were dependent for solidarity in the face of threatening adults, whether official or criminal. But Oloko argues the benefits extended beyond the acquisition of trading and interpersonal skills. In a collectivist culture which expected obedience to elders, trading afforded an opportunity for some autonomy and for play:

"Street trading activities provided children with freedom from frequent adult surveillance and control..... (It) afforded its young participants the opportunities to explore their physical and social environment in a manner that was not available to their counterparts who had not street-traded" (Oloko, 1993, p 472).

In more recent times the adaptiveness of street work for child development has been challenged by numerous factors. Oloko singles out two categories - those to do with the context of work and those to do with schooling. Work factors include: the trend for children to work for distant relatives, which has undermined traditional support and regulation against exploitation, but has not been replaced by state intervention to regulate their work; urban conditions and a more competitive environment place more pressures on children to work long hours; they are doing so in a much more 'dangerous' setting in terms of street crime and corruption. School factors include:

compatible with trading. Modern methods that take account of attendance and coursework disqualify a working child from high achievement.

Oloko concludes by identifying four broad groups of children in modern Nigeria. The first two groups are children who do not work and children who work some of the day, but also achieve good school results. She considers that both of these childhood lifestyles are adaptive to modern conditions. The third and fourth groups are more at risk. These are children who work and attend school but whose achievement is poor, along with children who work and either never attended school or dropped out early. In the past, street trading was a sustainable lifestyle, and it continues to offer socialising benefits, but

" ... illiteracy undoubtedly would create obstacles to occupational success and mobility, as well as personal development and meaningful political participation in an increasingly modern society" (Oloko, 1993, p 480).

Children's work, children's development, children's perspectives

The starting point for this paper was the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular the assumptions about child development implicit in Article 32. Conventional psychological images of the child are in danger of lending a veneer of scientific objectivity to the regulation of global childhoods in terms of particular cultural experiences and values. Generalised knowledge about childhood, generated mainly by Euro-American researchers working in Europe-American contexts, serves to legitimise particular cultural practices as a universal value and to label other childhoods as deviant or deprived.

Universal accounts of child development are now under challenge, both from within scientific psychology (from researchers arguing that learning, thinking, beliefs and identity are always embedded in the context of particular social relationships and cultural patterns) and from the fringes of the subject (from critics who argue that child development theories are themselves cultural constructions). Accepting these restrictions on the search for universal child development truths, I have proposed that the concept of 'developmental niche' is a helpful starting point for evaluating the impact of children's work in their lives; interpreting issues of harm and benefit in ways that take account of the context of children's activity, social relationships, personal identity and future prospects; acknowledging the function of work in relation to the family, school and other areas of activity; and recognising the powerful role that cultural beliefs about these issues play, in mediating both the impact of work and the effects of an intervention.

This final point is especially important, but neglected in simplistic ways of thinking about cause and effect. Parents, employers and working children themselves are thinking about the work they do and they have feelings and beliefs about it. These aren't just epiphenomena of work - they modify the function that the work plays in their lives - how far and in what ways (positive or negative) it affects their health, mental state, learning and adjustment. If children's work is valued, they are more likely to have a positive experience - they are more likely to cope with difficulties. If it is devalued compared to school, or denigrated in their own or others' eyes, or if they are stigmatised, then work is likely to be much more prejudicial to their mental and physical health and their social adjustment. Just as the traumatic impact of divorce on children has been modified as social attitudes have changed (Wadsworth 1986), so the impact of child work will vary according to whether peers, teachers and customers treat children with respect or demean them as vagabonds and outcasts. The international community must be sure to play a positive role in this process, through the way children who work are labelled and discussed. The most recent ILO Convention is proposed in terms

of "suppression of all extreme forms of child labour ... *preventing* children from engaging in or *removing* them from extreme forms of child labour ... providing for their *rehabilitation* and social integration" (ILO, 1998, my emphasis). Even in extreme circumstances, child-centred intervention must ensure that children experience these proposals, and their implementation, as benign and not as repressive.

I offer a final paradox in current thinking about the place of work in human activity. On the one hand, attention is properly being paid to the negative effects of work on human lives during the years of childhood. At the same time equivalent levels of concern are being expressed about the negative effects of unemployment amongst young people only a few years their senior. Arguably, the difference in perspective is not just about human development. It has much more to do with cultural assumptions. For age groups where economic activity is valued, being unable to work challenges core human needs for identity, role and value. For age groups where economic activity is devalued, the impact of being required to work may in some respects be similar. If children feel ashamed of having to work, this may be one of the harmful effects of their work.

Despite drawing attention to these important psychosocial dimensions of the issue, I am certainly not arguing that concerns about child labour are simply a cultural construction. There are core features of human health, growth and maturation shared by all children, and there are fundamental needs that must be met. But both the expression of these needs and the way they are met are always embedded in particular economic, social and cultural contexts. Framing policy in terms of generalisations about 'meeting children's needs', 'promoting children's healthy development', or 'enabling them to reach their full potential' distracts attention away from more fundamental issues about the many different expressions of need, routes to health, and human potentials (Woodhead, 1997).

In *The State of the World's Children*, the authors claimed:

"the world's governments have recognized children's absolute right to *unfettered* physical, social and emotional development and must be held to *their* word" (UNICEF, 1997, p 71, my emphasis).

This vision is at best an ideal, at worst misleading rhetoric. Extremes of bonded labour can be outlawed without implying the alternative is permissive anarchy. Children's development can hardly be described as 'unfettered' in the school environments that the UN Convention seeks to make compulsory. Even in 'high-quality' schools (however defined), children's development is constrained by the demands of attendance, good behaviour, an adult-imposed curriculum etc. Children's development is about socialisation as much as freedom, social adjustment as much as self-determination. To progress the

debate, it is essential to bridge the gulf between abstractions about 'needs', 'best interests', 'rights' and 'unfettered development', and the reality of diverse, day-to-day childhood experiences. General principles have to be interpreted in particular political, economic, social, religious and cultural contexts. They have to be understood in the historical context of change as well in the anticipation of future prospects. It might be argued that this process of contextualisation dilutes the power of general principles. But general principles have no power unless they can be rendered meaningful to particular situations. One of the most neglected sources of evidence about child work situations is children themselves, who have to negotiate competing pressures, goals and aspirations related to the family, school and employment prospects. Understanding their perspective is an essential complement to more generalised statements about child development. By way of conclusion, it is encouraging to note the increasing trend of listening to children's voices on issues of child work and child development, through participatory research and direct testimony (Redd Barna, 1994; Johnson et al., 1995; Johnson et al., 1998; Hart, 1996₁; PLA Notes, 1996). In other components of the Radda Barnen Children and Work project, the case for children's participation has been developed more fully (Boyden et al., 1998), including parallel studies of children's perspectives on their working lives (Woodhead, 1998) and of children's perspectives on projects and programmes for working children (Tolfree, 1998).

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